

**Gladys
Nilsson**



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Gladys Nilsson's paintings are enigmatic, exotic and absurdly humorous. They are narrative paintings; the images are succinct, painted with delicacy and skill, yet they are often so private as to appear almost completely abstract.

The imagery in these new "landscape" paintings evolved over many years. Nilsson is best known for her exquisitely beautiful watercolors, vibrant fantasies in which the masterful technique and the distortion of her sardonic figures battle with each other. The present change in surface (now flat, dotted, outlined, with the frame painted to become part of the total structure of the work) is a striking departure from the earlier paintings. Moreover, she is now involved with a definite landscape, rather than with figures alone. In the new paintings the personages—"tuber people" composed of vegetable-like shapes with long, winding appendages, and simian animals—are situated in a space overgrown with foliage, trees, bushes and clouds. "The work probably changed," she says, "because I've always admired Rousseau, and wanted to paint landscapes like those."

The space in these works is a dense, overlapping space, opening out in the center to make the landscape both more fantastic and more "real;" the color is grayed-out, subtle and limpid, and the paintings are mostly small in size. The smallest ones are framed with readymade painted embroidery hoops. Their scale, and the fact that they can be held in one's hand, emphasize the intimacy and intensity of the experience.

The iconography of the work is complex and eclectic, based on art historical sources or mystery fiction, researched with equal intensity. A large two-panel painting (*Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve After Cranach*) involved careful study of Cranach's imagery, color, and sources—"the bumpy warts come from a 15th-century Italian painting in the Philadelphia Museum"—whereas *The Big Green Man* derives from the title of a book by Kingsley Amis; *The Green Man* also refers to a supernatural creature composed of plants

and natural things, as well as to a costume that English chimney sweeps wore in parades.

Nilsson has drawn from many other sources, among them Egyptian art and naïve art (James Ensor, Australian bark paintings, and pictures and objects by prison inmates, which she collects). Of equal importance to her is the work of her contemporaries, mostly Chicago-based; among them are Roger Brown, Christina Ramberg, Philip Hanson, Ray Yoshida, Barbara Rossi and Joseph Yoakum. Her favorite artist, she says, is Jim Nutt. She also cites other sources, including a life-long interest in archaeology and biology and an avid devotion to certain TV shows, now mostly defunct.

Nilsson, who grew up in Chicago and studied at the Art Institute there, was a member of *The Hairy Who*, a group of six artists (Nilsson, Jim Nutt, James Falconer, Suellen Rocca, Art Green and Karl Wirsum) who first exhibited in 1966 at the Hyde Park Art Center. The origin of the name remains somewhat of a mystery; rumor—and a 1969 catalog essay—has it that "the group and the name were sprung fully grown, in this case, 'fully hairy.'" The artists had in common an obsession with the grotesque and absurd, a flat, linear, brilliantly colored style related to that of comic books, and an interest in primitive and popular arts. They were (and are, though the group has disbanded) passionate punsters and mis-spellers. Nilsson's page in a 1969 Corcoran Gallery Exhibition catalog includes a small figure saying, "She's always been a very sloppie writer;" a poster for a show of Nilsson, Nutt and Joseph Yoakum at the Candy Store in Folsom is advertised as "3 Famous Artists: the show for people who can't read."

Nilsson's statements about art, if not illuminating in the expected sense, are certainly refreshing—"I was a civil defense worker before FAMOUS ARTISTS came my way. It is truly inspiring.") Publicity photos are visual opportunities for similar tongue-in-cheek comments on the artist herself, and on the absurdity of the formality which requires them.

Gladys Nilsson's work has not had wide exposure on the East Coast, although there is presently a warrant out for her arrest in California. The public should take advantage of this exhibition before it's too late.

Marcia Tucker

Gladys Nilsson

1940

Born in Chicago, Illinois

1962

Graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

One-Woman Shows:

1969

San Francisco Art Institute, Clay Street Gallery

1970, 1973

Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

1971, 1972, 1973

Candy Story Gallery, Folsom, California

1971

Chico State College Gallery, Chico, California

Group Shows:

1966, 1967, 1968

The Hairy Who, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, Illinois

1968

The Hairy Who, San Francisco Art Institute

1969

The Hairy Who, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.

1969

The Hairy Who, Drawings at School of Visual Arts Gallery, New York

1969

"Don Baum Sez 'Chicago Needs Famous Artists,'" Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

1969

Spirit of the Comics, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

1969

Human Concern/Personal Torment, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

1970

Human Concern/Personal Torment, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley

1970

Serplus Slop from Windy City, San Francisco Art Institute and Sacramento State College Art Gallery

1970

Chicago Show, Feigen Gallery Downtown, New York

1971

Poetic Fantasy, San Francisco Museum of Art

1971

Boxed Top Art, Illinois State University, Normal and Southern Illinois University Gallery, Carbondale

1971-72

Boxed Top Art, Tour of New Zealand

1972

Chicago Imagist Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

1972

8 Artists from Chicago, Stern Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana

A PHOTO OF THE ARTIST.



1972

Sackramentoe Sampler I, Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento, California, Oakland Museum, California, and Tour of Brazil

A statement BY THE ARTIST.



Catalog

The paintings are all acrylic on canvas and were painted in 1972, unless otherwise noted.

Aleanry, 14" diameter

Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Gotoff

Ape-eary, 14" diameter

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Taylor

Arack-Napes, 23½" x 29½"

Lent by William Pomerantz

The Big Green Man, 86½" x 73¼"

Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Peter Broido

Crackned Horsez, 14" diameter

Lent by Mr. George Irwin

Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve after Cranach, Diptych,
86" x 105"

Lent by The Main Bank of Chicago

Giant Bryd, 45½" x 37½"

Lent by Phyllis Kind Gallery

Gr apes, 30" x 23½"

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Allan G. Sweig

Layered Playc, 45" x 37½"

Lent by Albert A. Robin

One, 14" diameter

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Cole

Pear of Horces, 12" diameter

Lent by David C. Ruttenberg

Terraced, 31½" x 37½"

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Gilford

To in the Timber, 45½" x 37½"

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Fell

Tranquel, 33½" x 37½"

Lent by Albert A. Robin

Two, 14" diameter

Lent by Linda Kramer

Waves, 39½" x 33½"

Lent by Mr. Wilbur Tuggle

Ape Place, 1973, 73" x 85"

Lent by Phyllis Kind Gallery

April 12-May 13, 1973

Whitney Museum of American Art

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